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ABSTRACT

Against the background of separate and inferior education for black Americans, the author discusses questions related to the effective teaching of economics to black students today. To the question of differentiated economics education by race, the author qualifies his negative answer by pointing to certain barriers to teaching economics to blacks, such as, basic skill level, exposure to economic institutions, and motivation, all probably due to white racism, however. Suggested solutions are remediation and effective teaching methods, such as the following: multi-media representations of economic realities, programmed instruction, inquiry methods, problem solving field work, and relevant subject matter selection. The latter approach requires that economics be taught from a cultural context by focusing on the black experience. (Author/DJB)

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TEACHING ECONOMICS TO BLACK STUDENTS

by

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INTRODUCTION

Under the dual system of education that developed in the American southland after the Civil War, a system of "Negro Education" evolved. This segregated duality existed at all levels, in both public and private education, from the elementary schools through higher education institutions. It was a system within a system. Since de jure segregation was primarily a southern phenomenon, "Negro education" was largely a regional strategem. It was significant, however, since the great majority of America's Negroes and/or black inhabitants lived in the South. And, as Myrdal has suggested, the white people of the South "have merely kept Negro [black] education poor and bad."[1]

From the beginning of the dual system of education in the United States until the United States Supreme Court's decision in Brown vs. Board of Education (the Kansas case) on May 17, 1954 declared that, "In the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place", and, to a lesser extent, even today keeping "[black] education poor and bad" has been buttressed by a tight system of racial segregation which has (a) deprived black people of those experiences that cumulatively develop rich cultural backgrounds; (b) denied black people those occupational opportunities and associational outlets that enrich home life and enable the quality of life itself; (c) misdirected the work habits of black people generally; and

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[1]Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, Volume 2, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962, p. 896.

(d) distorted the school performance of black enrollees by providing them with substandard facilities, hand-me-down furniture and equipment, second-hand books abandoned by "white" schools, outmoded curricula, and by white people giving their blessings to mediocrity in black education. Consequently, the historic black educational experience seems to have been characterized by low achievement in the schools and on standardized tests, where results are greatly influenced by cultural background, work habits, home background, and school performance.

Especially during the past decade black Americans have greatly intensified their long struggle for first-class citizenship in the land of their birth. As a result, millions of Americans have become sensitive to the historic collective neglect and mistreatment of their black fellow-citizens. Many schools, colleges, and universities are increasingly concerned with the black experience and responding to demands for black studies. More significantly, equally as many educational institutions are extending greatly increased opportunities to black students to earn a quality education. This has given rise to much concern about how to teach various subjects, including economics, to black students effectively.

Three Fundamental Questions

It may be profitable to approach the matter of teaching economics to black students by raising three fundamental questions, to wit:

1. What, if any, are the basic differences in teaching economics effectively to black students, on the one hand, and to non-black students, on the other?

It appears that there are no basic differences in the teaching of economics to black students and to non-black students. The subject-matter of the discipline is colorless and independent of racial classification. Since the subject-matter of economics must be the same for all groups, it would be

neither conceptually sound nor practically workable to attempt to teach the discipline differently to black and non-black students. Even more serious is the possibility that an attempt to teach economics to black students in some manner that is different from the way it is taught to non-black students may become the cynical gesture by which black brains and effort are diverted from the indispensable exposure to, and involvement in, the mainstream of society where true economic power and financial reward are to be found. Without an understanding of, and the ability to operate in, the societal mainstream, what chance would black people have as a derivative therefrom? Isn't it this superior ability which has been responsible for the success of blacks and whites alike - Robert S. Abbott, Morris Herndon, John Johnson, John Maynard Keynes, Lorimer Milton, Charles Schwab and others? On the other hand, was it not Marcus Garvey and Madame C. J. Walker's efforts to compartmentalize the parameter - thereby limiting the options in financing, markets, and recruitment - that caused their downfall? Nevertheless, a sensitive appreciation of these general matters and the historic milieu which has spawned today's black students suggest that certain factors pose specific barriers to the effective teaching of economics to black students.

2. What factors, if any, pose specific barriers to the effective teaching of economics to black students?

Since it seems unnecessary to belabor the obvious, mention of only three specific barriers to the effective teaching of economics to black students should suffice.

First, the dual system of education, which still exists for all practical purposes throughout the United States, has failed to adequately prepare most black students with the basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.

This relative unpreparedness appears to be, at least partially, responsible for the assumption of a condescending attitude by many instructors - both black and white - toward black students' ability and their failure to offer them rigorous, analytical, mathematical presentations of economic subject-matter.

Second, because of their limited exposure to, and contact with, the economic institutions in the community, the limitations of the curricula of the high schools from which they graduate, and the general nature of the environments from which they come, most black students usually bring a smaller inventory of basic economic knowledge into the classroom than middle class white students. This may make economic analysis and the development of economic concepts somewhat more difficult.

Third, far too many black students are not as motivated and/or aggressive as they should be. They raise relatively few fundamental questions in the classroom and seldom insist on rigorous, analytical examination of economic data and/or issues. It appears that perhaps most of them are content to take rather than help make their education.

The foregoing presentation suggests that whatever specific barriers to the effective teaching of economics to black students exist are probably due to white racism. It also suggests that these barriers may be more quickly overcome if economics instructors would regard the minds of black students as fires to be ignited rather than recepticles to be filled. Indeed, black students, like non-black students, do not need to be "taught" everything they ought to know about economics. They should be placed under impelling obligation to read, analyze, and evaluate the basic and the best literature in the field. It suggests further that these barriers will crumble faster if

economics instructors will create, by their personal examples, an atmosphere of excellence. The effective teaching of economics, or any other subject, ought to encourage black students to recognize, to desire, and to pursue academic excellence.

Whereas there are no insurmountable barriers to the effective teaching of economics to black students, some of them have been culturally deprived and may need remediation. Those in need of remediation should have an opportunity to obtain it. However, the quality of economics offerings should not be lessened under any circumstances. To do so would have at least two detrimental effects on black students. First, the black students will not be as well prepared as the non-black students with whom they will be competing in graduate school or the job market. Second, giving black students second-rate education relegates them to a second-class status which is especially detrimental to both their employment opportunities and their self-image.

3. What approaches and/or methods have been found most effective in teaching economics to black students?

Jerome Bruner has raised a basic question which all teachers must face, especially those who teach economics to black students. He asserts, "Students, perforce, have a limited exposure to the materials they are to learn. How can this exposure be made to count in their thinking for the rest of their lives?" Then he says that the answer, "lies in giving students an understanding of the fundamental structure of whatever subjects we choose to teach. This is a minimum requirement for using knowledge." He continues by arguing that, "in order for a person to be able to recognize the applicability or inapplicability of an idea to a ... situation and to broaden his learning

thereby, he must have clearly in mind the general nature of the phenomenon with which he is dealing."[2]

And yet, to perhaps most black students, much of our effort to teach economics has been characterized by irrelevancy and aimlessness. Too often, in the past, they have viewed the teaching of economics as a disorderly treatment of factual material with no real effort to relate economics to the realities of life in the black community or to reach practical conclusions regarding how a knowledge of economics may be used to improve the well-being of its inhabitants. This "aimless accumulation of precise knowledge, inert and unutilized",[3] as Alfred North Whitehead characterized it, has often "turned off" the interest of black students and probably led to some paralysis of economic thought by many of them.

If economics is indeed an art and a science then it should be made applicable to all situations and conditions and not confined to any spectrum of color or bias. Therefore, there should be no fundamental difference in the way economics is taught to black students and the way it is taught to non-black students. At the same time, however, some approaches to the teaching of economics to black students appear to be more generally effective than others.

Economics instructors in black colleges and universities seem to be making more and more use of multi-media representation as they attempt to increase

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[2]Jerome Bruner, The Process of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 11,18.

[3]Alfred North Whitehead, The Aims of Education, New York: New American Library (Mentor Books), 1949, p. 48.

black students' appreciation of economics, to create impressions that stimulate their interest in the discipline, and to facilitate their comprehension of the subject. Thoughtful and well-planned use of multi-media representation is being effectively used in bridging the gap between what seems to be the remoteness of what the students are studying in economics and the world of reality as black students perceive it. Furthermore, the use of various types of multi-media representation with black students not only enhances economics teaching and learning, but may facilitate the economical use of time in the teaching-learning process.

Although multi-media representation is not strictly the same as the reality, this media is being used more and more to satisfy the need for greater realism in teaching economics to black students. In general, it appears than an ever-increasing number of instructors of economics in black colleges and universities are using multi-media representation in teaching situations involving motivation, reality, and efficiency. The medium is also useful in creating general impressions of economic situations and conditions. It is especially helpful in enhancing the understanding of economics by those black students, whose experiences with the enriching aspects of our society's cultural and economic institutions have been limited, since it enables them to see and/or hear "the real thing" or a dynamic representation thereof.

Some instructors in black colleges and universities seem to be finding that programmed instruction in economics is quite effective with black students. In programmed instruction (a) instructional objectives are clearly specified, (b) subject-matter is carefully sequenced, (c) subject-matter is usually presented in small incremental steps, (d) the active participation of the learner is required, and (e) immediate feedback regarding the adequacy or

correctness of response, is provided. Hence, this approach should satisfy those who contend - rightly or wrongly - that the effective teaching of economics to black students requires that course materials be highly organized. Nevertheless, the ordering of course materials in logical sequence and giving careful attention to course structure do not necessarily result in a given course being so highly structured and/or academically oriented that intellectual initiative is stifled.

The teaching of economics to black students with programmed materials seems to be effective for at least three reasons, to wit, (1) programmed instruction recognizes individual differences and allows the learner to proceed at his own rate; (2) the discipline within programmed instruction is conducive to learning - it accentuates the organized nature of knowledge and forces the learner to actively participate in his own learning; and (3) programmed instruction removes anxiety over possible failure and provides instant awareness of results. These things are especially important to most black students, toward whose ability to learn economics their instructors have often taken a condescending attitude.

The inquiry-centered approach to the teaching of economics to black students seems also to be effective. With this approach students and instructors have cooperatively selected persistent economic issues, policies, and institutions for examination and identified economic concepts, principles, and relationship that may clarify and/or explain them. These economic concepts, issues, and relationships then serve as organizing principles that determine the selection of course content. Thus the basic principles and phenomena involved in clarifying and explaining the matters in this area that are of special interest to black students provide a setting which is conducive to their understanding

of economic principles, economic institutions, and economic policies and processes. As black students inquire into these matters they discover the processes by which economic ideas and policies are developed, verified, calibrated, evaluated, and refined.

The inquiry-centered approach forces students to (a) define issues and important concepts, (b) develop inquiry strategies for attacking issues and problems, (c) collect authoritative data for use in clarifying and solving problems, (d) develop criteria for acceptance or rejection of an original hypothesis, and (e) reach conclusions based on thorough examination of available data.

By capitalizing on black students' interest in issues and problems of concern to the black ghetto, the inquiry-centered approach may be used to force black students to actively participate in their own education; to emphasize how economic data and analysis may be used to clarify issues and to develop valid explanations of economic behavior, institutions, and policies; and to facilitate black students' understanding of economics.

On the basis of observation and report, there seems to be a considerable amount of field work taking place in black colleges and universities as instructors seek to make economics more meaningful to black students. The number of in-the-field problem-solving courses where economic analysis can be applied to issues and problems, such as (1) housing in the black ghetto, (2) the transportation dilemmas of the residents of the black neighborhood, (3) the market in the black community, (4) barriers to effective manpower utilization, (5) the economic effects of white racism on selected institutions in the black neighborhood and ways of combatting them, and (6) the impact of the prevailing local tax structure on the black community, and so forth seem

to be increasing in black educational institutions.

Perhaps the most meaningful approach to the teaching of economics to black students, or to any students, is to make the subject-matter relevant. This approach requires that economics be taught from a cultural context in which the focus for considering the subject-matter of the field, including the basic principles of economics, directly involve the black experience. This approach involves showing black students how the rigorous application of economic theory and concepts may be used to analyze and solve problems in the black community, and demonstrating how the basic areas of economics are of importance to black students.

The object of cultural context teaching of economics is not to constrict students' learning to the boundaries of the black experience, but to utilize their interest in that experience as a motivational leverage for the teaching and learning of the discipline. For example, in black colleges and universities (a) the study of inflation is often centered around its impace on the black ghetto; (b) the concepts of "leakage" and the "multiplier" are applied to the analysis of increased investment spending in the black community; (c) emphasis on the economics of discrimination is a characteristic of the Labor Economics course; (d) poverty is emphasized in the course on Contemporary Economic Problems in the United States; (e) the course on the Economic History of the United States concentrates on the economics of slavery; (f) the course on Economic Development emphasizes the problems of developing an economic foundation for black people in the United States.

More effort is probably put into the teaching of economics in black colleges and universities than appears to be true of the larger institutions. Much more

attention is probably given to the selection of examples to which black students can relate. For instance, in the study of tariffs, segregation is often analyzed as a tariff; little stores in ghetto neighborhoods are examined in connection with the study of imperfect competition; interest in the multiplier principle is frequently aroused through discussion of community multipliers and the problems of black banks in retaining reserves; and similar examples.

This approach to the teaching of economics to black students does not require lowering the quality of economics courses or making them less rigorous and theoretical. It does mean that within the limits of the general principles of teaching and learning considerable latitude in adaptation to the realities of society and the needs of students is both possible and desirable. Indeed, this approach is in accord with Charles A. Beard's (slightly paraphrased) assertion that, "instruction in [economics] is conditioned by the spirit and letter of scholarship, by the realities and ideas of the society in which it is carried on, and by the nature and limitations of the learning process at the various grade levels across which it is distributed."[4]

Hence, "the necessities of scholarship, the realities of society, and the requirements of the teaching and learning process"[5] are the stubborn and irreducible stipulations that are binding upon teachers of economics as well as teachers of other subjects. This seems to indicate that economics and/or any other subject can be taught in an intellectually honest manner to any student on any grade level without regard to race, creed, or color. At the same time,

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[4]Charles A. Beard, A Charter For The Social Sciences, New York: Charles A. Scribner's Sons, 1932, p. 2.

[5]Ibid., p. 3

however, some economics instructors in black colleges and universities, who have taught both black and white students, suggest that economics course materials for use with black students should probably be more highly organized than materials for use with white students. In this connection, it seems significant to note that Due asserts "there must be a high degree of selectivity in presentation" of major economic concepts and information about the economic system without making any reference whatsoever to race.[6]

SUMMARY

The foregoing discussion sets forth in bold relief the position assumed here, to wit:

1. There should be essentially no difference in the way economics is taught to black students and non-black students. However, because of the deeply ingrained and continuing debilitating effects of 350 years of slavery and second-class citizenship the effective teaching of economics to most black students may require the utilization of carefully selected approaches. Albeit, whatever problems exist in the teaching of economics to black students are marginal problems - reading disabilities, comprehension insufficiency, and mathematical inadequacies, all resulting from inferior educational opportunity plus cultural deprivation, but all susceptible to being overcome by hard work, determination, and good teaching.

2. The constant complaint about black students' mathematics insufficiency is probably not as serious as is generally believed, since mathematics itself is necessary only for the higher levels of economic theory. And, as Samuelson has pointed out, "Logical reasoning is the key to success

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[6]John F. Due, "The Teaching of Economics: Goals, Testing, and Evaluation", New Developments in the Teaching of Economics, edited by Keith G. Lumsden, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967, p. 111.

in the master of basic economic principles, and shrewd weighing of empirical evidence is the key to success in mastery of economic applications."[7]

3. There are significant differences in the backgrounds and motivations of black and non-black students. This has led to the highly arguable contention by some educators that teaching economics to black students may be effectively approached with somewhat less abstraction and in a more practical manner than with non-black students.

4. Many, perhaps most, black students are capable of learning economics as rapidly and as well as any other students, but the lilly-white manner in which it has been taught has stifled their ability to demonstrate how really capable they are to learn economics.

5. The underlying premise set forth by Jerome Bruner in The Process of Education seems to be that "the first object of any act of learning, over and above the pleasure it may give, is that it should serve us in the future. Learning should not only take us somewhere; it should allow us later to go further more easily."[8] Hence, Bruner advocates the transfer of attitudes and principles which "consist of learning initially not a skill but a general idea, which can then be used as a basis for recognizing subsequent problems as special cases of the idea originally mastered."[9] This sort of transfer "is dependent upon mastery of the structure of the subject-matter",[10] which Bruner defines as "understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be

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[7]Paul A. Samuelson, Economics: An Introductory Analysis (Seventh Edition), New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967, p. 5.

[8]Jerome Bruner, op. cit., p. 17

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., p. 18

related to it meaningfully. To learn structure, in short, is to learn how things are related."[11]

Unfortunately, we seem to have only inadequately, if at all, taken this premise and these guidelines into account in teaching economics to black students. Moreover, the lilly-white approach to the teaching of the discipline has deprived most black students of an opportunity "to learn how [economics is] related" to the realities of their lives and the viability of their communities.

6. Whereas the desire for effectiveness seems to suggest that approaches to the teaching of economics to black students should probably be very carefully selected, and perhaps somewhat differentiated from those used with non-black students, the substance and rigor must be the same. What must never be forgotten in teaching economics to black students, or in teaching any subject to any students, is that:

> There is no procedure that can render substance unnecessary; there is no technique of classroom legerdemain that can take the place of scholarly competence; there is no device of instruction that can raise the quality of the educative process above the purpose, the knowledge, the understanding, the vision of the teacher who employs it.[12]

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[11] Ibid., p. 7

[12] American Historical Association, Report of the Commission on the Social Studies, Conclusions and Recommendations Of The Commission, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934, pp. 71-72.